DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 197 UD 034 018

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TITLE	The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions about Educational Vouchers.
INSTITUTION	Marquette Univ., Milwaukee, WI. Institute for the Transformation of Learning.
PUB DATE	2000-03-00
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Educational Options for African Americans (2nd, Milwaukee, WI, March 2-5, 2000).
AVAILABLE FROM	Marquette University, Office of Research, 2025 North Summit Avenue, Suite 101, Milwaukee, WI 53202. Tel: 414-765-0691; Fax: 414-765-1271.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Admission (School); Educational Finance; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Low Income Groups; Private School Aid; Private Schools; Public Schools; Racial Segregation; *School Choice; Special Needs Students

ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that a campaign of "distortions and lies" about educational vouchers is being conducted by opponents of expanded educational options for low-income parents. It suggests that aspects of the voucher debate are subject to frequent distortion, refuting myths that are being spread. These focus on such issues as: overall admission practices in public and private schools; admission practices for special education students in public and private schools; other private school practices and issues (e.g., voucher programs siphon the best students from public schools, and vouchers are not helping the children they were designed to help); racial segregation; fiscal issues; and academic achievement. The paper concludes that the anti-voucher campaign is having an affect, and two groups must accept responsibility for calling attention to these "lies" and repudiating them: the news media and citizens on all sides of the issue. It recommends that these groups hold accountable the perpetrators of such "lies" and urge elected policymakers to reject distortions designed to block a fair debate of the issue. (Contains 34 references.) (SM)

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THE SATURATION CAMPAIGN OF LIES AND DISTORTIONS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL VOUCHERS

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MARCH 2 - 5, 2000 MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

SUMMARY

Surveys show that a majority of low-income parents, mostly of color, support expanded educational options for their children. This reflects wide academic achievement gaps between children from low-income families and those in more affluent families.

Several types of expanded educational options are being studied and implemented. These include: charter schools; public-private ventures; school management by for-profit firms; educational vouchers; education tax credits and deductions; and home-schooling.

Education Week calls Milwaukee "ground zero" for several of these initiatives. This reflects substantial growth in:

- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program;
- Charter schools authorized by the Common Council of the City of Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and
- Charter schools authorized by the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Opponents of this movement want to end its growth. Their efforts include a campaign of distortion about several options under consideration. One target — not the only one — is tax-supported educational vouchers. This paper documents that campaign of distortion, a campaign that typifies the broader effort to discredit the movement for expanded educational options.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper documents lies knowingly spread by opponents of expanded educational options for low-income parents. The number of examples presented, which are only a sample, shows how widespread the problem is.

Some who distribute misinformation do so unintentionally. They correct errors brought to their attention. They circulate drafts, in advance of formal release, so discrepancies can be identified.

Still, honest errors occur. They are an inevitable part of public discourse.

This paper is not about such errors. It is about known falsehoods, relentlessly circulated, long after evidence reveals them as either flat-out wrong or as misleading half-truths. It is about organizations with multi-million dollar budgets that know fact from fiction but ignore the distinction. It is about their use of misinformation to discredit reforms that would broaden educational options for low-income parents. This extent of the effort suggests a strategy is at work:

Lie. Lie often. It works.

The result is a saturation propaganda effort that has spanned the last several years, where falsehoods are issued and re-issued long after they are shown to be inaccurate or misleading. Why does this continue? Because it works.

A primary goal of this effort is to shape news reports, and thus influence elected officials, in the volatile debate about expanded parent choice. The campaign mostly has worked: when describing vouchers and related programs, news stories frequently report untrue statements in ways that suggest they instead are accurate; often, untrue claims are reported simply as accepted fact.

For the most part, the media have overlooked these untruths. Some exceptions stand out. In September 1999, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* chronicled anti-voucher falsehoods in a lengthy, page one article, "School choice attacks often fail accuracy test." The *Journal Sentinel* has published other stories and editorials questioning claims of voucher opponents. However meritorious, these stories reach a relatively limited audience. Compared with the national wave of distortions, a small dose of truth causes a modest stir.

On rare occasions, when perpetrators are called to account, they seem unfazed. The lying certainly doesn't stop. When it comes to depriving low-income parents of expanded educational options, the ends appear to justify the means. Those who spread falsehoods about vouchers — the focus of this paper — also distort other plans that would change the educational status quo. They target charter schools, public-private partnerships, for-profit ventures, home schooling — anything that expands traditional educational alternatives.

ORGANIZATION

This paper describes aspects of the voucher debate that are subject to frequent distortion, including:

- Overall admission practices in public and private schools.
- Admission practices for special education students in public and private schools.
- Other private school practices and issues.
- Racial segregation.
- Fiscal issues.
- Academic achievement.

I present verbatim quotes from opponents of tax-supported vouchers, along with information refuting each claim. The distortions I cite, while extensive, are **only a sample** of inaccuracies. Their breadth and repetitive use suggests a conscious effort to contaminate public debate. Most of the falsehoods I cite were issued in 1999 or 2000, usually long after evidence confirmed their inaccuracy.

In refuting these claims, I rely on facts **from actual programs of tax-supported vouchers for low-income parents.** Specifically, I reference the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the nation's oldest voucher program, and Cleveland's Pilot Project Scholarship Program. I do not cite the Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program, now only in its first year.

Some voucher opponents openly misrepresent these existing programs. Others instead imply that their comments involve real programs, but in fact they describe imagined practices in non-existent programs, a further measure of deceit.

Discussions of actual programs are a particular problem for voucher opponents. Factual evidence from these programs refutes their lies. When that occurs, opponents are discredited in the eyes of elected policymakers.

The truth about existing programs shows that policymakers can design programs that achieve specific goals and avoid the bogus, alleged problems. The ability of public officials to exercise such control contradicts the myth, encouraged by voucher opponents, that elusive and harmful "private" interests direct such programs.

PRIVATE SCHOOL ADMISSION PRACTICES

Voucher opponents say or imply that private schools choose the voucher students they want. For example:

- "Choice promoters talk about choice leveling the playing field, but choice schools are still picking and choosing what children they want" (Wisconsin State Rep. Christine Sinicki, 1999).

- "Private schools normally screen applicants on a number of grounds, including, but not limited to: prior academic achievement; standardized test scores; prior disciplinary record; written application; interviews with applicants and their parents; and parents' willingness to volunteer at the school..." (American Federation of Teachers — AFT — 1999).

- "Parental choice is a misnomer. Private school[s] make the choice of which students to admit or reject. Private schools retain the right to reject or accept any student, regardless of whether the student holds a voucher..." (National Education Association — NEA — 1999).

- "The [private] schools can choose the best, a practice known as 'cherry-picking' or 'cream skimming'" (Frederick C. Thayer, 2000).

None of these statements are true insofar as students in Milwaukee's program are concerned. Nor are these alleged practices allowed in Cleveland's voucher program.

Instead, private schools must use what amounts to an open admission, random selection policy for voucher-eligible students (Section 119.23, *Wisconsin Statutes;* Sections 3313.974-313.979, *Ohio Revised Code*).

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction cites no instance, in the Milwaukee program's 10-year history, where an eligible student was subjected to the kind of admission criteria cited by choice opponents. To be sure, if such an isolated violation occurs, voucher opponents will portray it as the norm.

The claims cited above illustrate a pattern evident in the overall campaign of untruths and half-truths. Each of these four statements has an aura of plausibility. Each would be accurate if confined to **some** practices at **some** private schools involving **some** students who don't use vouchers. But, these same claims are not true when it comes to voucher students and voucher schools in **existing** voucher programs. Such half-truths illustrate the insidious willingness of major voucher opponents to lie.

PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMISSION PRACTICES

In contrast to their bogus claim that private schools screen voucher students, voucher opponents say that the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), and public schools in general, "cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door" or "must admit all comers" (Sinicki, 1999, and Price, 1999).

Not true. In fact, the situation is the mirror opposite of these claims. MPS uses a wide range of criteria to screen admission at the elementary, middle, and high school level (Fuller and Mitchell, 2000). Examples are pervasive.

- Fully 37% of MPS high school students attend schools with selective admission criteria.

- MPS has 21 elementary and middle schools with "eligibility requirements," including schools for "the Academically Talented" and "Gifted and Talented" students.

Where MPS schools use a wide range of such screening practices, Wisconsin's voucher law prohibits private schools from doing so in the case of voucher-eligible students.

Screening criteria used by MPS include: prior academic achievement; test scores; disciplinary records; written applications; and interviews with students and their parents — the criteria that voucher opponents wrongly claim are used by private schools to screen voucher students.

As demonstrated below, MPS also uses many other screening criteria in denying students access to schools.

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

Voucher opponents say or imply that private schools do not accept voucher students with special education needs. For example:

- "Private schools are not required to accept special education students" (AFT — Sandra Feldman —May 1998).

- "[D]isabled kids...kids with learning disabilities...kids who have behavioral problems, kids who have been involved in the juvenile criminal justice system. Those kids get left behind [by school vouchers] because...a lot of private schools...don't have to take them, so that leaves it for public education to deal with those children" (Tammy Johnson, Wisconsin Citizen Action, 1999).

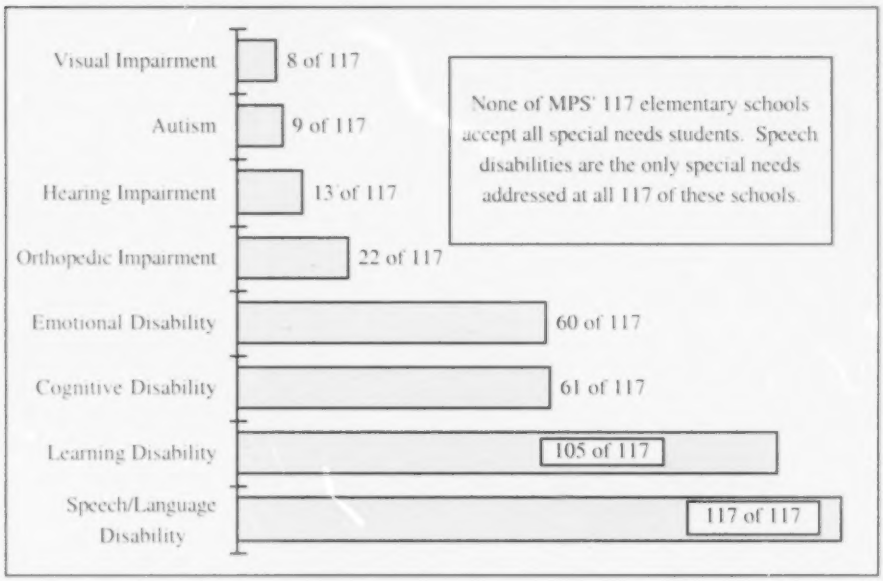
In Milwaukee, that's simply untrue. While my knowledge of the Cleveland situation is less complete, I am advised that circumstances there are similar to Milwaukee's.

The truth, in Milwaukee, is that private schools may not exclude any voucher-eligible student based on special education needs. I know of no actual case, cited by voucher opponents or any other source, where such a student has been denied admission to a private school. To the contrary, many MPCP schools offer a range of programs for special needs students, with or without vouchers.

All the while, voucher opponents repeatedly assert that "[p]ublic schools cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door" (Sinicki 1999) or that "...nearly all public schools offer [special education] services" (AFT, December 1998).

Such statements constitute more untruths and half-truths. MPS data show that **none** of its elementary, middle, or high school accepts all students with special education needs (Fuller and Mitchell, 2000). As the following chart shows, speech disabilities are the **only** special education need addressed at all MPS elementary schools.

MPS elementary schools accepting special needs students.



Reflecting this, the MPS school directory advises parents: "When children with special education needs select a school...where their individual needs cannot be appropriately met, parents will be contacted...to discuss options at other schools..."

In the end, MPS, **not the parent**, almost always has the final say in determining where a special needs student attends school.

Private voucher schools don't have this kind of discretion. When it comes to voucher-eligible students with special education needs, a private school may advise the student's parent about available programs, but the school may not turn the student away if the parent chooses that school.

Students with disciplinary problems. The same situation pertains to students with disciplinary problems. While voucher opponents wrongly claim that private schools exclude such students, **Wisconsin law does not allow private schools to consider disciplinary history in reviewing voucher applications.**

In contrast to such open admission requirements for voucher students, MPS has an extensive program of alternative and partnership schools **where it unilaterally may transfer** truants, adjudicated juveniles, or other "at risk" students. Many of these programs are in private, non-profit schools. The capacity of these programs, as of October 1999, was 3,579 students, or more than 3% of the MPS enrollment. The majority of this capacity was in private organizations (Fisher, 1999).

Fermin Burgos, a former director of MPS alternative programs, said those programs let "MPS...provide a whole range of different options...tailor-made programs for pregnant teens, chronic disrupters, or students coming from juvenile institutions. With [private] contracting, we can offer those programs. In some cases [private schools] are more effective than the traditional schools" (Beales and Bertonneau, 1997).

MPS is not alone among public schools in relying heavily on private schools to educate some of its most difficult students. The practice is widespread (Beales, et.al).

OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL PRACTICES AND ISSUES

Voucher opponents promote several other falsehoods. For example:

- "Voucher programs siphon the best students from public schools, resulting in an overall decline in the quality of public school achievement" (People for the American Way — PFAW — April 1999).

- "Milwaukee is the demonstration project where all elements of the Right's strategy converge [including] bait-and-switch tactics that convert programs for the poor to subsidies for middle class private school students...How much increased tax subsidy of middle- and upper-income families will we allow to be diverted from ensuring strong public education for every child?" (PFAW, September 1999).

- "Vouchers aren't helping the children they were designed to help: students doing poorly in low-performing public schools..." (North Carolina Governor James Hunt, 1999).

None of these claims are true. Actual studies of programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland show that:

- "The demographic profile [of Milwaukee's program] was quite consistent...[S]tudents who ultimately enrolled...were from very low-income families, considerably below the average [Milwaukee Public Schools — MPS] family...Blacks and Hispanics were the primary applicants...Choice students were considerably less likely to come from a household in which parents were married..." (Witte, 1995).

- "As intended, the [Milwaukee program] appears to be serving children who meet statutory requirements related to low income...In addition, the program serves pupils

whose overall ethnic composition is similar to that of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) pupils. In the 1998-99 school year, 62.4 percent of Choice pupils were African-American, and 61.4 percent of MPS pupils were African-American" (Legislative Audit Bureau — LAB — 2000).

- "Prior test scores of [Milwaukee] Choice students [showed they] were achieving considerably less than MPS students and somewhat less than low-income MPS students" (Witte, 1995).

- Cleveland "[s]cholarship families tend to be low-income, of color, and headed by a single mother. These characteristics are not surprising given the goals of the scholarship program and the parameters used in selecting children for the program. Preference was given to low-income families and the existing racial proportions of [the Cleveland public schools] were to be maintained. Of scholarship families...73.4% are non-white...70 percent are households headed by a single mother, and the mean family income is $18,750...In general, the scholarship program seems to be serving the families for which it was intended...minority families of low income. Further, the program generally does not seem to support the private school enrollment of more advantaged (e.g., higher income) children" (Metcalf, 1999).

Regarding Governor Hunt's comments, I have written him several letters noting the errors in his widely reported comments. He has not responded, nor has his office provided any indication that it has issued corrections. Governor Hunt's decision not to correct his errors is surprising and disappointing.

On the other hand, the PFAW's failure to correct errors comes as no surprise. The many falsehoods that it distributes suggests a campaign of willful lies. Here are two more:

- "The very best private schools won't participate in voucher programs."

- "Few private schools are located in economically depressed areas."

Each of these statements is untrue.

Participating schools. Five private Milwaukee high schools accepting voucher students had graduation rates twice as large as in MPS. More than 80% of students at the five schools took college entrance exams, compared to less than 50% in MPS. The five schools had attendance rates exceeding 95%; in MPS it was less than 80%. Three of the five are regarded as among the city's "elite" private schools.

Location of schools. Most Milwaukee voucher students live three miles or less from their choice schools (LAB). In contrast, thousands of low-income MPS students travel between 1-2 hours a day to distant public schools. By contrast, at least 33 private schools in Milwaukee are in neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of MPCP-eligible families (Fuller and White, 1995).

RACIAL SEGREGATION

School choice opponents assert that giving parents vouchers will increase educational segregation. For example:

- "Those vouchers [in Milwaukee] actually hurt inner city African-American kids, helping suburban white kids who are either already in private school or whose parents want them there" (Hunt).

- The "natural and foreseeable consequence [of expanding the MPCP will be] further segregation of the [Milwaukee] schools..." (NAACP, 1996).

- "Voucher programs...allow for splintering along racial and ethnic lines...[They] could end up resembling the ethnic cleansing occurring in Kosovo" (*Albuquerque Journal* — David Berliner — 1999).

- "We can't allow our nation's schools to be divided once again [through vouchers] by skin color..." (Kweisi Mfume, 1999).

Evaluate these statements in light of the actual evidence.

Milwaukee. Governor Hunt is wrong. There are no suburban students in Milwaukee's voucher program. All voucher students are Milwaukee residents (*Wisconsin Statutes*). Most are African American and Hispanic (LAB). Additional evidence disproves the other characterizations and predictions:

- Prior to vouchers including religious schools, "[t]he racial composition of choice students by school [was] mixed. Four...schools...were almost all African American. Four others [were] predominantly African American (above 70%). One school [was] 93% Hispanic, and the remaining three schools are more evenly integrated. This...is partly the result of conscious specialization on the part of the schools (for example, African American cultural schools and a bilingual school); and partly the result of location. One well-integrated school has a formal policy of insuring that its student body matches its carefully defined community area in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and economic class. Several...schools with relatively high tuition expressly entered the Choice Program to provide some cultural diversity in their student body" (Witte, 1994).

- Racial balance has increased since the voucher program added religious schools: "...[A] year after the expansion of choice to religious schools...the critics are wrong. The program *has* enhanced racial diversity..." (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 1999).

- Vouchers have improved racial balance on a school-by-school basis: "To...compare racial and ethnic isolation in choice schools and MPS schools, we identified [racially isolated] MPS and Catholic elementary schools...[N]early twice as many MPS elementary students were in racially isolated schools" (Fuller and Mitchell, 1999).

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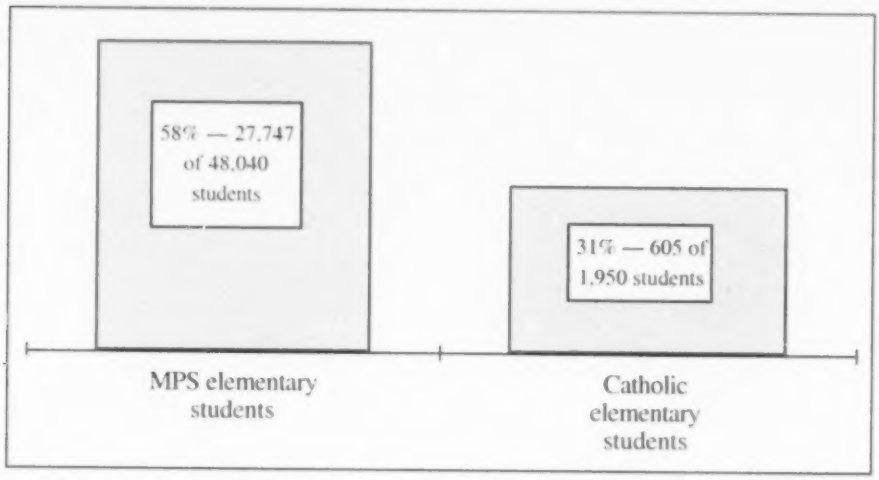
Per cent of non-Caucasian MPS and Catholic elementary students in racially isolated schools, 1998-99.



Cleveland. "Nearly a fifth...of recipients of a voucher in Cleveland attend private schools that have a racial composition that resembles the average racial composition of the Cleveland...Only 5.2 percent of public school students in the Cleveland metropolitan area are in comparably integrated schools" (Greene, 1999; also see Metcalf, 1999).

FISCAL IMPACT

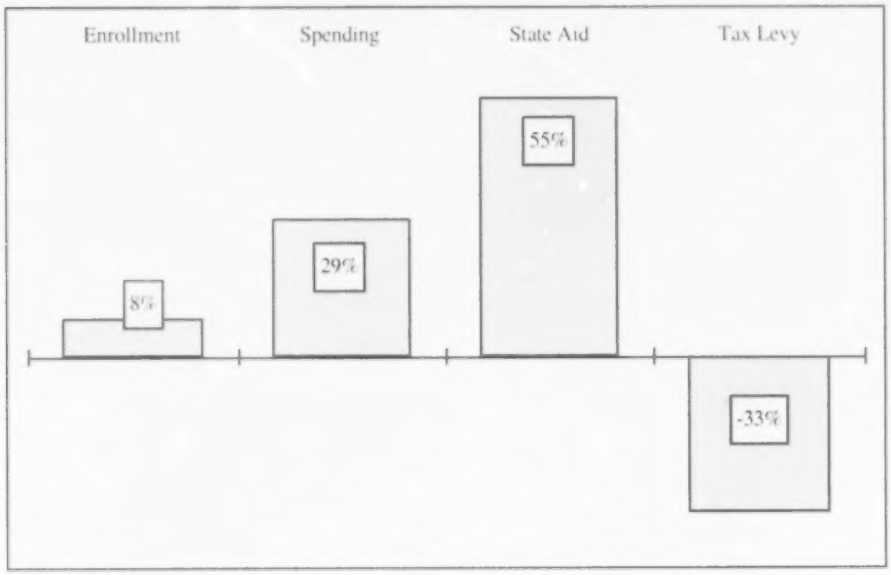
Voucher opponents repeatedly offer versions of the following claim: "In areas where vouchers have been introduced, public schools have had their funds drastically cut" (NEA, November 1999).

Again, consider the evidence.

Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is in its tenth year. Predictions of severe fiscal impact have not been realized. To the contrary, in the program's first nine years (1990-91 to 1998-99):

- Real MPS spending grew more than three times faster than the enrollment.
- State aid to MPS grew nearly seven times faster than enrollment.
- MPS property taxes declined 33%.

Per cent change in enrollment and real spending, state aid, and property taxes, MPS, 1990 – 1999 (Fuller and Mitchell, 1999).



Even some MPS officials doubted the grim and unrealized fiscal predictions of voucher opponents. As the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported, in 1995:

> "Expanded school choice could result in substantial overall savings for Milwaukee Public Schools and allow the district to ease classroom overcrowding, three reports presented Wednesday night to the School Board show. A June 28 report…distributed to school officials Wednesday night by [Director John] Gardner said MPS would find savings in its educational programs 'because [voucher] students would no longer be educated by MPS and thus, costs in the district should be reduced'…In addition, board members said the district would not be required to build new classroom space…resulting in substantial long-term savings."

Cleveland. While I have not independently studied the fiscal situation in Cleveland, I quote below from two studies by groups that are favorable to vouchers.

- "In Cleveland, the public schools still receive per-capita funds for students enrolled in the voucher program. In 1997, for example, the net revenue received by Cleveland Public Schools exceeded voucher program costs by $118,473" (The Buckeye Institute, 1997).

- "The president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers said the $5.25 million spent…on voucher students (about $3,300 per student when other costs are considered) was

money being denied to public schools. But state officials pointed out that the public schools, which spent $6,506 per student in 1996-97, came out ahead because the state funding formula still counted the voucher students in Cleveland's enrollment" (Cordell, 1998).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Voucher opponents have made some of their most misleading claims in the area of academic achievement. Here is one of their staples, emphasis added: "There is **no evidence** that vouchers improve student learning. **Every serious study** of voucher plans concludes that **vouchers don't improve student achievement**" (NEA, 1999).

These claims are demonstrably untrue.

Milwaukee. Here is the most cautious of three peer-reviewed studies:

- While "there is no substantial [test score] difference...between the Choice and MPS students...[o]n a positive note, estimates for the overall samples, while always below national norms, do not substantially decline as the students enter higher grades. This is not the normal pattern in that usually urban student average scores decline relative to national norms in higher grades..." (Witte, 1995).

Meanwhile, the other studies found clearly positive results:

- A Princeton University economist, writing in Harvard's Quarterly Journal of Economics, said that ". . .being selected to participate in the choice program appears to have increased the math achievement of low-income, minority students by 1.5-2.3 percentile points per year" (Rouse, 1998).

- Scholars at Harvard University and the University of Texas-Austin also found positive Milwaukee results. Released in 1998 in a book from The Brooking Institution, the findings also were published in *Education and Urban Society*. The authors found statistically significant gains in math (6.8 percentile points) and reading (4.9 percentile points) scores for students in the choice program three and four years (Greene, Peterson, and Du, 1998 and 1999).

Cleveland. According to Cleveland's official program evaluator: "[A]fter two years, and for students who attended public school prior to entering the scholarship program, there appear to be [statistically significant] positive, but limited effects on achievement. What remains to be determined is whether the [gains] that appeared at the end of year two represent the beginning of a trend toward increased achievement in future years" (Metcalf).

Now, consider again the claim of voucher opponents: "There is **no evidence** that vouchers improve student learning. **Every serious study** of voucher plans concludes that vouchers **don't improve student achievement**."

This claim clearly is a lie.

CHARACTER ASSASINATION

Not surprisingly, those who lie about vouchers are threatened by influential scholars with opposing views. Consistent with their overall strategy, the predictable response is to lie about the scholars.

Voucher opponents have drawn a bulls-eye on Harvard's Paul Peterson, one of academia's most distinguished political scientists. Consider this description of the study, noted above, that he co-authored on academic achievement of Milwaukee voucher students.

> A "study funded by pro-voucher foundations found that voucher students outperform public school counterparts, but experts have discredited this research — commonly known as the 'Peterson study' — because of shoddy analysis...Unlike other studies of the Milwaukee...program, the Peterson team never submitted its work for peer review but instead released their findings directly to the media — in one instance, to the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*" (PFAW, 1999).

These half-truths, distortions, and lies show how much misinformation can be spread in only sixty-six words.

Foremost is the lie that the work of Peterson and his colleagues has not been peer reviewed. In fact, it appears both in a peer-reviewed book from The Brookings Institution and in a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.

And, what about the unnamed "experts"? In 1997, I asked the NEA, the AFT, and others making such claims who the "experts" were (Fuller, 1997). I was directed to NEA and AFT staff members and to Alex Molnar, of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee education faculty. Where has Molnar "discredited" Peterson? Not in Molnar's 1996 Wisconsin court testimony, where Molnar misrepresents Peterson's study and acknowledges the limits of his own statistical expertise. Not in *Education Week*, where Molnar mischaracterized the conclusions not only of Peterson, but also of Rouse.

The People for the American Way is a curious group to suggest that published ideas are best evaluated by sources of financial support. Its budget includes contributions from the NEA, AFT, and numerous other voucher opponents (PFAW, 1999).

PFAW also suggests that providing information to the news media is questionable. If so, PFAW's own information mill is a sham.

But, rather than judge information by how it is released, or who provides financial support, a better method is to focus on its content. It is by that standard that PFAW and others who lie about educational vouchers are best evaluated.

CONCLUSION

There are more than 50 million American children in K-12 education. While fewer than 12,000 use tax-supported education vouchers, some of America's strongest and best financed political organizations have made a major commitment to suffocating that option. Groups such as the NEA, AFT, and PFAW have committed tens of millions of dollars a year to lobbying and organizational efforts aimed at blocking vouchers.

As this report demonstrates, a key part of their effort is a campaign of lies. This campaign seeks to distort and manipulate the public debate. The obvious, willful nature of the campaign is repugnant.

Unfortunately, the campaign has had an impact.

Two groups must accept responsibility for calling attention to these lies and for repudiating them. One is the news media. The second are citizens on all sides of these important issues. The media and general citizenry should hold accountable the perpetrators of lies documented in this paper. They should urge elected policymakers to reject the distortions and falsehoods advanced to block a fair debate of issues such as educational vouchers.

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